

THIS VERY MINUTE AS I LOOK OUT my kitchen window which faces south, I can see five men and two large trucks out in the field. The trucks are making deep tracks in the sodden earth, and the five men are engaged in taking down a very large snow fence which they put there last fall. They have done this for the past two years since I've been living back in my family homestead, and how many years before that I don't know. Perhaps at some time they asked someone's permission, but they have never asked mine, and I feel a bit resentful about the whole procedure. I'm sure if I were to complain I would be told that the snow fence must be there "for the general good," just as the conservation people say when they devise means of taking land or pass by-laws to make it value-

less; or the state, when it takes it by eminent domain to build a road "for the general good." There was a time when people didn't take this sort of thing sitting down. At least my father didn't.

Back in the '30s, when I was a child, one fine spring day a group of men appeared on our farm. They busily arranged tripods and spread themselves over a large area of the field. My father fairly flew out of the house and ordered them off his property. They practically ignored him, and went about their business. He came back in the house, crestfallen.

"They're from the State, and they're going to build a road." A few days later a large envelope arrived in the mail.

"They're offering me \$1400 for eight acres of my land! That is high-

way robbery. I'm going to fight it."

He made several trips to the State House in Boston and gave us a blow-by-blow description of what went on in there.

"I'm dealing with a bunch of fools and dummies, not only in Boston but out here too. They told me that I was the only one who has complained, and that if they gave me more money for my land, they'd have to give more to everyone."

One day he came back from Boston unusually sad and weary. "I've made a settlement. They won't pay me a cent more, but I got them to agree to move the road 100 yards nearer to the woods and not to split my hen-house in half. I told them it would be a hardship to have my farm split in half, so they're going to build me a cow-pass."

"A what?" we all chorused.

"They're going to build a tunnel under the road."

"Did you tell them you have only one cow?"

"They didn't ask me how many cows I had."

"But it's going to cost a lot of money to build a tunnel, just for one cow. It doesn't make any sense. Why won't they pay you the money it's going to cost for the cow-pass? Would you settle for that?" my mother asked.

"Of course I would, but they won't do that."

For weeks bulldozers and all sorts of heavy machinery made hideous noises and raised clouds of dust. Every morning my father woke up fuming. When the men came to the kitchen door and asked for water, he wouldn't speak to them. My mother

## Highway Robbery

When the State decided they would have my father's land for a road they were planning, my father didn't take it lying down...

by Priscilla Harris  
Illustrated by Austin Stevens





gave them water, and sometimes homemade root beer. My father often mumbled, "It's getting more like Russia all the time, when the State can come and take away a man's land."

They finally got a rough layer of stone laid, and left the rollers on "our property." My brother and I found where they hid the keys, and I drove a roller and he a grader back and forth one Sunday afternoon when my mother and father were having their afternoon nap.

Then one day some different-looking equipment came lumbering along the road, stopped, rolled off the hard surface down a steep grade and started digging. We ran into the house to tell my father, and for the first time in weeks he brightened a bit and showed some interest in what "they" were doing. "They're starting to build the cow-pass," he said.

"Are they going to build it *there*?" "They've had engineers testing the soil for several days now, and that's where they've decided to put it," my father said.

I couldn't understand any of it. The preceding summer we had had a

drought, and our barn well was getting dangerously low. A minister friend of my father's was visiting us and he said he was sure he could find a spring on the farm. I followed him around while he looked for a willow tree; I watched as he cut off a branch with a fork in it and hurried to a low pasture. Holding the forked end, he walked around for awhile, and I stood spellbound as the end of the branch bent slowly toward the earth. "There is the spot to dig your well," he said. I remember what a thrill it was when he let me hold the branch and I actually felt the pull of the earth. Sheer magic. My father and brothers started digging immediately. In a very short time the earth became soggy muck, then water. Gradually began to seep into the hole. All that summer there was plenty of water in the new well, long after the barn well went dry. When we didn't need the well any longer, my father filled it with rocks so no person or animal could fall into it.

What I couldn't understand was: why was my father standing idly by, watching the men from the State dig a tunnel *there*, so close to the very

spot where just the year before the willow branch had found us a spring? When I tried to question my father, he said, "They're supposed to know what they're doing. They chose the spot. I didn't."

All the kids in the neighborhood and some of the men gathered to watch. I felt very important. The huge shovel lifted an amazing amount of earth the first day. Men rushed around building forms to hold up the road. A cement mixer joined the other heavy equipment. Such noise and activity!

They quit work around noon on Saturday, and that afternoon it started to rain. It rained all night, and most of Sunday. On Monday morning when the men came back to work, there was about a foot of water in the tunnel.

"You must have had a cloudburst down here," one of the men said to my father. I'm sure my father knew that most of that water didn't come from the sky. "Well, we'll just have to get a pump," the man said. Then I heard him exclaim, "Good God, what the hell's happened here!" We went to the other side of the road

where the big digger was, and one side of it was about a foot down in the mud. Soon another big piece of machinery came lumbering along the road. It was a huge crane. It groaned and shuddered as it tried to lift the hind end of the digger out of the mud. All day long the men ran around shouting orders to one another, and the crane tried time and again to move the digger. The men were up to their knees in mud. All the time the pump was gushing water to the drier side of the road.

At the end of the day the tunnel was almost free of water, and the big crane looked exhausted. The next morning another crane arrived, and the two of them managed to get the digger out of the mud. A cheer went up from the crowd. Then someone shouted, "Look! The tunnel's full of water again." They started the pump, and it gushed away all day long. When the men came back the next morning, they shook their heads when they saw the tunnel with at least a foot of water in it. They started the pump again—and this time they kept it going all night. As

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## STREETS AND BYWAYS

### HIGHWAY ROBBERY (continued from page 73)

I lay in bed I could hear its steady chugging, like a heartbeat.

The next morning when the men came to work, the boss said, "Now that's more like it. Now we can finish the cementing." The tunnel was dry. They worked really hard all day. The cement mixer whirled around, trucks came and went, children dashed up and down the banking. At the end of the day the boss said, "Tell your father his cow-pass is finished. We'll be back in the morning to get the equipment."

Early the next morning the men arrived. From the house we could see them standing in a sort of semicircle, looking down into the tunnel, like people looking into a new grave. We ran, and got there before my father. The engineer looked up and said to my father, "Goddammit, Mr. Swanson, you'll just have to teach your cows to swim." They didn't start the pump or anything; just started up the engines and left.

No cow ever used the cow-pass. The only animal that did, that I know of, was our Newfoundland dog. He loved to swim, and we children would watch him start on one side of the road and come out dripping wet on the other. The following year, the water became sort of scummy, and frogs took over the tunnel.

Last summer as my brother-in-law was heading towards Boston along Route 53, he saw several men and a cement mixer stationed near the old cow-pass. He stopped and asked them what they were doing there, and they answered, "We're going to fix up this old cow-pass. It's one of the few left in New England, and they say it has historical value." How many more hours they spent on it I have no idea. I do know that if they had paid my father somewhere near what he wanted for his land, the State would have saved itself a lot of money. ♦♦

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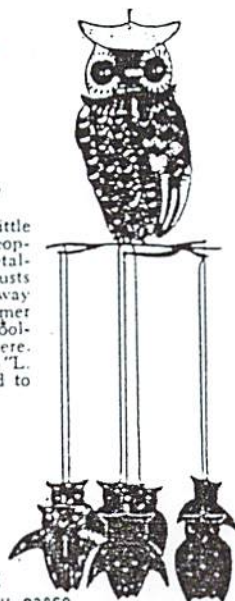
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